

‘We need to show what music looks like’



Marie Pascall reports on a rollercoaster domain of high demand, low control, maximum exposure interpreting which will force any SLI to dig deep into their strategic toolkit

Seven years ago, my friend Jackie Thompson, who is deaf, wanted to go to a music festival for her birthday and was refused access with no explanation. Knowing that I interpreted theatre and had a performing arts background, she asked me for support in challenging the festival.

I'm glad to say that Jackie had one of the best birthdays ever. Three of my interpreting peers – Dionne Smith, Jacqui Beckford and Paula Cox – agreed to volunteer with me and, from that day forward, not only did the festival embed BSL Access, it also agreed to pay us as professional SLIs. This was the start of my rollercoaster ride into the world of music interpreting.

Nothing could have prepared me for the beast that is the entertainment world, one of the last industries to open their doors to deaf customers. Previously, when access was permitted, it was done so reluctantly and was unregulated, often with an inadequate standard of provision, using volunteers or people who were not registered SLIs and offering low pay. The deaf community were left with a substandard and restrictive experience that fell short of that of their hearing counterparts.

Misconceptions, lack of understanding, ignorance and financial constraints were all key

factors in access being refused. The industry provided a blanket approach to access, meaning that deaf customers were treated as people with physical disabilities, rather than people with a communication requirement. ‘Here is a free carer’s ticket – can’t you bring your own interpreter?’ may sound all too familiar.

Making waves

Many service providers assumed that deaf people could not appreciate music and therefore ‘why would they want to go to a music concert?’ As we know though, the world of music is not closed off just because you are deaf.

People tend to forget that music is felt and not just heard, with sound fundamentally made up of waves – a vibration of energy that we experience through our entire body. This means that music is felt on a physical and emotional level by everyone. Cymatics – the study of sound wave phenomena and their visual representations – offers great visual insight into what sound vibrations can do to elements such as water and sand (Jenny, 2001). This in turn helps us to understand how music affects the body. Sound waves felt all over the body are translated into neural messages

and sent to the auditory cortex for processing. Interestingly, both deaf and hearing people process music in this same part of the brain, just with neural messages that haven’t necessarily come from the ear (Neary, 2001).

Music has values far outreaching that of just entertainment. The chemical reactions we have in our brain when experiencing music (whether we are deaf or hearing) have profound effects on our mental wellbeing. Music can reduce cortisol levels (our stress hormone) and increase dopamine (pleasure and motivation). However, it’s the oxytocin reaction that really inspires me; sometimes dubbed the ‘trust molecule’, it influences our social behaviour and helps us to form bonds (Churchland & Winkielman, 2012).

Performing an interpretation

The role of a performance interpreter is paramount to the deaf audience achieving an equitable experience to hearing peers. We are essentially the bridge between the artist and the customer, with one customer describing it as ‘the last piece of the jigsaw puzzle’.

My ethos, shaped by training and working within the community, is to perform an interpretation and not to interpret a performance. These are two very different approaches. We need to show what music looks like – if we do not, then what is the difference between music and dialogue?

When someone interprets music, they may put their hands together formally between each sentence of a song, become static and wait for the next sentence, or produce the sign and stop while the singer is still lingering on a high note. Every time they do this, there is disconnection between the customer, music and artist, distorting the experience for the customer – there is a shift in energy. The customer must reprocess and tune into the interpretation every time that disconnect happens. They will also see that the artist,

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musicians and audience are not static and are still receiving music and information.

By utilising elements of the performance interpreter’s toolkit, we can show what the music and singer’s voice sound like, bringing the interpretation away from just a narrative descriptive approach. Many BSL users, all with their own unique way of accessing music, will be tuning in to the interpretation.

When incorporating the following techniques, the interpretation should allow any customer to take away what they want from the experience, regardless of their position on the SSE–BSL continuum and previous knowledge of the song:

- ▲ Musicality
- ▲ Rhythm
- ▲ Emotional investment
- ▲ Non-manual features
- ▲ Body language
- ▲ Movement
- ▲ Proforms
- ▲ Role shift
- ▲ Hierarchy
- ▲ Placement
- ▲ Compounding signs
- ▲ Lip pattern
- ▲ Morphing signs
- ▲ Playing with signing frame space and intensity of the signs
- ▲ More subjective and less objective
- ▲ Song-structure awareness

For deaf audiences to achieve the same feeling of a continued experience, we must provide a holistic performance interpretation. By synchronising to the artist and incorporating the

above list, along with clear reflection of the artist's and crowd's energy and persona, we can reduce the disconnect that happens when customers continually look between the stage and the interpreter throughout the show.

Translating back into emotion

Emotional investment is important. The intention of any song is to leave the audience with a feeling. Our aim is to ensure the deaf audience is left experiencing the same feeling when they see the song expressed in sign language.

In her TED talk, composer and singer/songwriter Rachel Claudio explains how feelings are translated into music. Coming from an individual's raw emotional lived experience, it is then translated into sound (Claudio, 2017). As the SLI, we must translate that sound/lyric back into emotion for the audience to fulfil their engagement with the music. These skills can be learnt and developed with preparation and training, but some people have them instinctively.

For those who find this more challenging, we explore a layering strategy in training that can be used when an SLI is preparing and translating the piece. Having translated it, they then consider each sentence and think about what they are conveying with their body, ie in this part of the song they are starting an argument, so we ask them to think about where their legs should be. Perhaps one foot lunging slightly forward in a threatening position, their neck reached out, their hands tense and their sign intensity sharp and hard. We ask them to think about each element, as well as the orientation of the signs; that way, it doesn't become overwhelming trying to do it all at once.

It's often the tone of voice accompanied by the instruments and rhythm of the music that conveys the emotions and produces the shivers we feel. When you perform an interpretation, you become the voice and instruments in order to provide the audience with the same end-feeling.

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To demonstrate, if an artist is singing about heartbreak, the SLI's posture and body language will need to reflect a more vulnerable disposition – their feet may be together, knees bent, shoulders hunched, head lowered, with their eyes looking out lost in thought or with a desperation in them. Depending on how the artist expresses heartbreak, this could be shown using a smaller signing frame, sign intensity may become more gentle and delicate to show their vulnerability, as well as using hierarchy/role shift to show a feeling of lower status. The interpreter would use these features and incorporate them to the rhythm of the music.

Customers have described performance interpreting as 'seeing the music come alive'. In June, I was co-working with the deaf performer, Jayne Fletch-Brander, interpreting Ed Sheeran, and some of the customers had never been to a BSL-accessible gig before. At the end, they asked what other dates were BSL-accessible, as they wanted to try and get tickets to be a part of the show again at another venue. Obviously, they are going to see the artist, but we must be providing an enjoyable experience for them to want to request the service and pay to see the show again.

Opening doors

Deaf attendees are the catalyst for change. My friend enjoyed her first festival so much that she asked me to support her in gaining BSL Access at a concert. The O2 accepted our BSL Access proposal and the live music industry began to open its doors across the UK, providing

professional BSL Access on customer request. This was all driven by deaf customer demand.

With events and promoters starting to appreciate and value their deaf customers, BSL Access is now being taken seriously, with very few expecting us to volunteer anymore. By being acknowledged and paid appropriately as professional SLIs for large commercial events, we can choose to do some work pro bono or reduce our fee for small-scale venues, non-profits and charities.

The ever-increasing deaf audience means that many festivals are embedding BSL into their Access plans. This is a hugely positive step forward, but we still have a mountain to climb. One of the biggest challenges is the customer journey, from confusing websites and ticket purchasing options to the dry hire of venues, meaning a different layout/seating plan for each event held there.

Some promoters and production companies have begun embedding BSL Access into their events, notably Wembley Stadium, Kilimanjaro (Ed Sheeran's promoters), Festival Republic (Latitude, Download, Reading, Leeds, Wireless) and Loud Sound (British Summer Time, All Points East, Camp Bestival).

Hours, prep and guesstimations

Music interpreting can be very enjoyable but it is an extremely difficult specialism and quantifying the hours needed to prepare for a music concert is a challenge – it could be anywhere from 50 hours upwards. I've spent months preparing for a

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performance. We often use a number between 50 and 100 hours to highlight to event managers and SLIs new to the domain the number of hours an SLI can spend preparing.

Preparation includes research into the band, the lyrical meanings and exploration of translation ideas, matching your translations to the rhythm, emotion and intent of the songs. This, on top of weather difficulties, poor working conditions, long hours and rarely received setlists, results in guesstimations being our only point of reference, with songs often being unnecessarily prepped for. Negotiating setlists to be sent to you can be a job in itself. My expectations were reset after having a band write a setlist in front of me, 15 minutes before playing, only to then change it on stage, with another artist saying they had not followed a setlist in 25 years! While many challenges are out of our control, it's important to remember that BSL Access is there for paying customers, meaning that the service should be the best it can be. When interpreting for Celine Dion at British Summer Time, the setlist was revised three times on the day of the show.

It's also worth noting that performance interpreting is very physical. If you are working solo, you can easily burn over 600 calories interpreting a show. You also need to be confident both on stage and in intimate settings; sometimes we are 1.5 metres from the customers, which can often be more daunting. Flexibility is essential because of the nature of the beast – setlist, logistics, set ups and the ever-changing environment.

Some of the language used in songs can be very violent and sexually orientated, which in BSL can be rather graphic. In these situations, the SLI will need to use their fourth wall, briefly directing the potentially offensive interpretation at an impersonal spot, being sure to not make eye contact with the audience. People often sing along to songs without realising the true nature

of the content. When I was interpreting for Steps last year, they were doing a cover of Diana Ross' Chain Reaction. It wasn't until I began interpreting that I realised it was about oral sex.

People may think performance work is for confident, egotistical people, but I spend most of my time trying to build people's confidence and supporting peers to achieve the best access they can in any given situation and not beat themselves up because they couldn't do their best work due to things that were out of their control. I've experienced the best teamwork in this domain, especially in festival interpreting. You become a little festival family, including the customers, because they can see you running around like a headless chicken trying to get setlists, interpreting in the rain and the mud and doing whatever you can to make sure it's good quality Access.

Exposure

Often you will see social media videos of performance SLIs interpreting. The very nature of working in a public domain means you are on display. However, I'd like to acknowledge that horizontal violence exists in our profession and that we must support each other in eliminating it. I have seen interpreting peers criticised online by members of the profession after watching a 20-second clip and with no insight into what's happening, the environment or who the audience is. An interpreter may never have heard the song before or may have had six other bands to prepare for that weekend, or the customer may have requested the band 30 minutes ago and the SLI may not have a setlist. It is seldom the

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interpreter who shares videos, rather members of the audience who have enjoyed the experience and are raising awareness of Access. Please be considerate of context and criticism.

I'd also like to note that the media seem to focus primarily on the SLIs at an event. We must ensure that the press is signposted to the deaf customers/professionals who are responsible for this demand in BSL Access.

In the performance domain, there is a lot of demand on the interpreter and little control. It is rare that you will ever be able to deliver your very best interpretation, especially at festivals. In such situations, it helps to reflect and consider the Demand and Control Theory.

Toolkit of strategies

For those considering working in this domain, it's important to hone your interpreting skills first. You will need a toolkit full of strategies such as fixed interpreting structures of concepts, use of creative fillers, creative interpreting, storytelling skills, advanced skills in roleshift, being subjective, exploring ambidexterity, understanding and playing with morphing and compounding signs, playing with orientation depending on meaning, co-working strategies being fed in BSL while on stage, emotional leakage control, reflective coping strategies and regular supervision. However, there are also plenty of opportunities to observe and shadow music interpreters and be part of a team.

Diversity and versatility are vital. Reflecting the culture and idiosyncratic style of the artist should never be an afterthought. We must all invest in increasing the number of professionals who identify as interpreters of colour and ensure that society is more truly represented.

This rollercoaster journey has involved overcoming many of my own personal challenges. Having no hearing in my left ear and unable to use a hearing aid, I quickly realised how little I can

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access live song lyrics or live dialogue, so I avoid some music genres. I would find interpreting a Rock festival extremely challenging.

Deaf interpreting

I'm currently working with RSLTs and deaf performers to find effective and efficient methods of delivering access at concerts and festivals by both deaf and hearing professionals.

Working with Jayne Fletch-Brander has been an amazing experience. I believe she is the first ever deaf performer to do a BSL-interpreted stadium tour in the UK. Fletch begins the preparation process by working alongside an RSLI funded by her AtW. They go through all of the English to BSL translations to ensure the content and meaning is correct etc, then Fletch works her magic and gets it up on its feet. We both have an interpreter supporting us in the stadium sitting opposite us discreetly. I'm fed the dialogue in BSL as I cannot always hear – and some lyrics if it's a new song – and relay this to the audience. Fletch

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uses the interpreter as a prompt, with cueing strategies to check she is in time with the music. We are aiming to develop more opportunities for deaf performers and RSLTs to explore BSL access at concerts.

Working across domains

It is paramount that interpreters have access to regular supervision and mentoring. Support in developing buddying systems and engaging with customers as much as possible is vital to help ensure that customers have an experience equitable to their hearing peers.

There are still many challenges and gaps in services for the community, and it's important that interpreting resources are still focused on where there are urgent and significant needs, ie interpreting for health/mental health/social services/business settings and education. Fortunately, performance interpreting is often needed in the evening and weekends, having less of an impact on educational, business and community domains. Most of my practice involves working in social services, mental health and VRS work. Variety gives a sign language interpreter a rich resource of learning and understanding of the diverse needs and culture of the community. You need this foundation to build transferable skills that you can adapt to audiences and modify your language when interpreting. ▲